



# Big Spending Military Budget Is Supposed to ‘Restore Deterrence’: Yet US Already Deters a World Full of Threats

by Doug Bandow

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Since World War II never has the US been in such danger, or so Washington’s bloated military budget would suggest. "Defense" outlays long ago stopped being about defense as commonly understood, at least of America.

Last year’s military spending bill ran \$768 billion. Adjusted for inflation it was more than during the Korean War, Vietnam War, and entire Cold War, even with Ronald Reagan’s sizeable buildup. Noted Vox’s Jonathan Guyer: "The only time this bill has been larger, adjusted for inflation, was in 2011, at a moment when the US had a peak in troops in Afghanistan and Iraq."

Total "national defense" expenditures, which include non-Pentagon spending, tell an even more dramatic story. Last year was the highest ever, even greater than during the Iraqi/Afghan war years. And up an incredible 28 percent since 2017, with more money pledged by the Biden administration and even more demanded by voracious Republican war lobby. Often America’s annual increase in military outlays is greater than *the total military budgets* of all but a handful of other states.

Naturally, the president requested a nearly \$32 billion increase atop this year’s outlays, which of course were higher than those of 2021. And, unsurprisingly, the Biden administration talks as if this money was meant to protect America. Declared the Department of Defense, its "budget request **reinforces our commitment to the concept of integrated deterrence.**" **In fact, deterrence is an oft-cited military objective. Officials and analysts alike insist that vastly more money is critical to "restore deterrence," "maintain or restore deterrence," and "deter attacks" and "aggression."**

Yet who is Washington deterring? Who is America "defending" against? Terrorism remains a threat, but is not existential, and is exacerbated rather than diminished by promiscuous military intervention. Other forms of combat, most notably information and cyber warfare, are real and threatening, but of a very different nature. Most important, no one has attacked or tried to attack, militarily, the US. Nor is anyone likely to do so.

Not the Europeans, who until the invasion of Ukraine were determined to do as little as possible militarily, placing responsibility for their defense on Washington. Not China, which lags dramatically in nuclear capability and is undertaking a strategy of anti-access/area denial to prevent the US *from attacking it*. Not Russia, whose conventional military lacks global reach and, as is evident from its botched campaign against Ukraine, suffers from significant weaknesses.

Not North Korea, which is attempting to build a nuclear deterrent capable of striking the American homeland *to prevent US intervention over there*. And not the potpourri of other hostile Third World States, most of which could not resist the ill attention of a single US aircraft carrier let alone the full power of the American government.

Deterrence is effective and need not be restored.

The US is almost certainly the most secure great power in human history. Its neighbors north and south are weak and pacific, long dominated militarily, politically, and culturally by the American colossus. The US enjoys vast oceans east and west, separating it from the world's most powerful nations throughout America's entire existence. A strong navy and air force maintain an extended defense perimeter, protect more distant possessions, and secure sea lanes. Indeed, with 11 carrier groups the US navy is more about coercing other nations than safeguarding American territory or commerce.

Today the only practical existential military threat to America is nuclear, posed by the handful of states with ballistic missiles of sufficient range to hit and number to destroy the US. (Long-range bombers, too, could threaten, but missiles are more certain to get through.) Few of these states are hostile and those which are would face devastating retaliation for any attack. The nuclear danger, though elevated by the Russian attack on Ukraine, remains well below the level during the Cold War.

Once America finished conquering its share of North America its wars were almost all conflicts of choice, and rarely over interests that could be characterized as important, let alone vital. (Certainly not the Spanish-American War, World War I, Vietnam, or any of the post-Cold War conflicts. Only World War II and the Korean War, both set up by previous US military interventions, could claim any serious strategic purpose.) By-and-large Washington's wars could and should have been avoided.

Compare that to America's most obvious rivals. China borders 14 nations by land and several more nearby via water. Over the last century it fought Japan, the Soviet Union, South Korea, India, and Vietnam. During the same period the Russian/Soviet Empire was twice invaded by Germany and assorted other states. As the Soviet Union Moscow also fought wars in

Afghanistan and against China and intervened militarily in Eastern Europe. India lost a war with Beijing but thrice defeated Pakistan, while sometimes fighting inconclusively as well. In a kaleidoscope of constantly changing alliances the Europeans battled for centuries, before finally, mercifully, losing their will for war. Unfortunately, they also misplaced their desire to protect themselves.

So, what is Washington doing with all the money pouring into the Pentagon?

Defending *other* nations. That is evident in both Europe and Asia. Indeed, the Biden budget is explicitly funding the "U.S. European Command, \$4.2 billion for the European Deterrence Initiative." Also included: "The 2023 Pacific Deterrence Initiative highlights some of the key investments that DOD is making that are focused on strengthening deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region."

Why, nearly eight decades after the conclusion of World War II – when Western Europe has recovered from war, Central and Eastern Europe has been liberated and joined the West, and the Soviet Union has collapsed, are the Europeans still dependent on America? Why, nearly eight decades after the conclusion of World War II – when Japan attained the world's second largest economy, and retains the third largest – is Tokyo still dependent on America? Why, more than seven decades after the end of the Korean War – when the Republic of Korea enjoys an economy more than 50 times the size of the North's and a population twice as large – is the ROK still dependent on America?

The answer is simple. Because the US continues to treat these and other states as helpless dependents. Indeed, American policy long was to discourage the Europeans from doing anything on their own. Washington wanted them to spend more, to be sure, but only under its guidance and control.

As for Japan, the US originally disarmed the island state, only later realizing that Americans could use a little help in protecting the free world. Even so, in 1990 Marine Corps Gen. Henry Stackpole infamously insisted that US troops had to remain in Japan as informal occupation force. "No one wants a rearmed, resurgent Japan," he insisted. "So we are a cap in the bottle, if you will."

Washington retains wartime operational control of the South Korean military, an extraordinary sacrifice in sovereignty. Some ROK officials resist taking over their own military lest doing so might suggest to Washington that the South need no longer remain on America's defense dole. Better for South Korea to save a few won by remaining helplessly dependent than stand on its own.

And no one in Washington appears to imagine doing anything but expanding America's international welfare system. With China on the rise and Russia at war, Washington's foreign policy establishment, the infamous Blob, named by Ben Rhodes, deputy national security adviser to President Barack Obama, naturally is going in the wrong direction. The Biden administration is insisting on even greater US commitment and control, with plans to further inflate the military budget, add American troops to new, permanent garrisons in Europe's east, and make equivalent force improvements in East Asia.

Indeed, Korea's incoming conservative government wants Washington to return both tactical nuclear weapons and "US strategic assets, such as nuclear bombers and submarines, to the Korean peninsula." As North Korea improves its nuclear arsenal, that means the US would be risking its cities to protect Seoul, an increasingly dangerous bargain for America and unbelievable one for the ROK.

However, if there is one good to come out of the Russian attack on Ukraine, it is to deflate the fearmongering commonly deployed to justify ever larger US military budgets and European deployments. Moscow so far has found Ukraine impossible to subjugate. The claim that Vladimir Putin could pivot from Kyiv, pull an Adolf Hitler, and launch a blitzkrieg across Europe to the Atlantic must now be recognized as a fantasy fit for Hollywood.

At the same time, European governments, most importantly Germany, have been forced to take the issue of defense more seriously. For the first time since the end of World War II, there appears to be *public* support for doing more. The US should encourage this shift by, finally, after decades of claiming to be the all-seeing, all-knowing indispensable nation, doing less. Only then will the Europeans recognize the necessity as well as justice in taking over responsibility for their own security.

America's defense budget should be just that, spending to protect the *US republic* from attack. Ukraine's brave and stout resistance against Russian attack proves that the Europeans can defend themselves. So, too, could America's Asian friends. It is time for Washington to insist that they do so.

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